



Research Update is published by the Butler Center for Research to share significant scientific findings from the field of addiction treatment research. This Research Update was written by guest writers from FCD Prevention Works.

The Social Norms Approach to Student Substance Abuse Prevention

Healthy Truths Reduce Use

The evidence-based social norms approach to substance abuse prevention is a simple concept with a profound implication: sharing healthy truths can reduce student use of alcohol and other drugs. The reality is that many students around the world do not regularly use alcohol or other substances. By sharing this information with students, their parents, schools, communities, and especially peers, young people are taught to hold healthier, more realistic beliefs and to feel less pressure to “fit in” by using substances.^{1,2} Communities that employ the social norms approach to prevention see decreased student use of alcohol and other drugs, no matter what initial levels of use look like.^{5,6,10,11,16} How exactly does the social norms approach to substance

abuse prevention work? What is the evidence behind it? How can it be used to keep healthy kids healthy?

Common terms used in the social norms approach:

A **“social norm”** is a real behavior or attitude of a group. Students often think that the social norms of their peers are less healthy than they really are.

A **“normative belief”** is a belief about what a social norm really is. Students tend to hold normative beliefs that exaggerate the amount of substance use really going on among their peers.

“Anticipatory socialization” is the way students think about their future social life. Students are more likely to drink alcohol or use other drugs when they imagine the need to do so in order to fit in later.

“False consensus” is the incorrect belief that others are like us when it comes to unhealthy behavior. For instance, very few students drink at higher risk, but those who do tend to think that “everybody does it.”

“Pluralist ignorance” is the incorrect belief that others behave differently than us when it comes to healthy behavior. For instance, many students choose not to drink alcohol but feel alone in this choice.

What Social Norms Look Like in Healthy Communities

The social norms approach is an evidence-based, outcomes-driven way to prevent unhealthy behavior. The approach finds that while many students of all ages, and most middle and high schoolers, do not use alcohol or other drugs, they perceive that the majority of their peers do use alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs and often in heavy doses.^{3,7,9,12,15} Therefore, the social norms approach to prevention rests on two primary components: (1) gathering information about real social norms—always healthier than students anticipate, and (2) correcting false normative beliefs. Once the whole community is committed and the data is collected, application of the social norms approach at a community level can be a rich and rewarding experience, one where student and adult false perceptions are replaced with healthy, accurate information, and any risky student behavior is replaced with a healthier counterpart rooted in true community norms.^{4,14}

The Risk of Unhealthy Student Attitudes and Beliefs

FCD has surveyed over 65,000 students, across 25 countries and 120 schools, from 2009 to 2015, using its externally validated FCD *Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey*.¹⁷ From this data we can see that when a student perceives an environment to encourage alcohol use, a student is more likely to engage in that behavior. For example:

- Students in grades six through twelve who agree with the statement “it is cool to get drunk” are 5 times more likely to report binge drinking in the last month.
- About 82% of all FCD students either do not drink or drink once a month or less. Yet 45% disagree that most students at their school don’t drink or are light drinkers.
- Students who binge drink are 76% less likely to see a risk in binge drinking, whereas students who don’t drink are 13% more likely to see a risk in binge drinking.

THE HAZELDEN BETTY FORD EXPERIENCE

FCD, part of the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, is the leading international nonprofit provider of school-based substance abuse prevention services. For decades, FCD has worked worldwide to provide students and the adults who care for them with the knowledge, understanding, and skills they need to make intelligent, healthy choices about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. Additionally, hundreds of young people find freedom from addiction every year through the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, the leading provider of addiction treatment services and educational materials for young people, through its programs for adolescents and young adults.

QUESTIONS AND CONTROVERSIES

Don’t some students overestimate the health of their peers from time to time, or underestimate use? What is the role of the social norms approach to prevention in such cases?

The efficacy of the social norms approach is founded on the remarkable consistency of student overestimations of use coinciding with underestimations of peer health across countless populations, school communities, and individuals. While a student here or there may underestimate use on a measure or two within a multimeasure survey, thousands of results from social norms-based instruments across decades reveal that virtually all surveyed students overestimate use and underestimate peer health on most of the measures to which they respond. Based on such consistent trends, patterns, and results, communities may reasonably and effectively employ the social norms approach to substance abuse prevention regardless of inevitable variations in student opinion across individuals and communities.

HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

Students and the Adults Who Care for Them: If healthy students can help their peers realize that healthy, and not risky, behavior is the norm, these students can promote an increase in healthy behaviors in their school community. Students should become media literate—many social norms come from the media’s portrayal of how youths behave on TV, in movies, in music, and online. When understanding the marketing strategies behind many of these messages, students become informed consumers, unconvinced by exaggerations of use by young people in the media. Students should focus on the positive—the majority of students are making the healthy choice not to abuse alcohol or other drugs. For every student who may drink this weekend, there are plenty of other students who do not. Take the opportunity to readjust false perceptions; when others focus on the unhealthy behavior of a minority of students, remind them that students who chose not to

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Perceived Risk of Binge Drinking

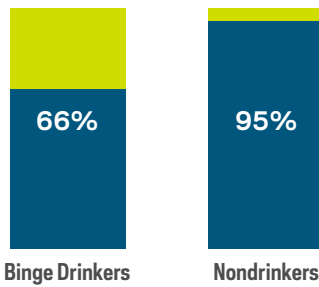


Image source: FCD Prevention Works, August 2015

Attitudes and behavior are linked together, and changing unhealthy attitudes can change unhealthy behaviors.

The Influence of Younger Students' Perceptions of Older Students' Behavior

Older students serve as role models, whether they choose to be or not. Younger students will observe their behavior and make choices based on what they perceive to be "normal behavior."^{8,13} While we expect to see increases in alcohol use as students get older, larger increases can occur when the environment is perceived to encourage alcohol use. For example, 86% of FCD 8th graders do not

drink, yet only 41% believe their classmates don't drink. This gap widens as students get older: 70% of FCD 9th graders do not drink, yet only 15% believe their classmates don't drink. As the attitudes shift, so does the behavior: 51% of FCD 10th graders do not drink, yet only 5% believe their classmates don't drink.

Younger students not only hold false perceptions of their peers, but they also misperceive the grades above them. Only 2% of 6th–12th graders think that seniors don't drink. In reality, 25% of 12th graders report not drinking alcohol, a healthier proportion than their younger classmates perceive.

Next Steps in Prevention Using the Social Norms Approach

We know from our data that schools that routinely use our services see improvements in their students' attitudes and behaviors. Schools that have employed FCD's Early Intervention Health Systems training see fewer students choosing to binge drink, up to 4% less. Focusing on prevention by tackling the misperceptions surrounding alcohol and other drugs use can make the difference in keeping healthy kids healthy.

Image sources: FCD Educational Services, August 2015

HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION CONTINUED

use are in the majority. Most important, keep living a healthy life. One of the most meaningful ways peers can contribute to the health of a student community is to set an example for classmates and younger students. Laughing with friends, getting great grades, leading a student group, or participating on an athletic team, all without using alcohol or other drugs, tell fellow students that the choice not to use is not only healthy—it is fun, rewarding, and respected.

Parents: Become well-versed in data describing the reality that the vast majority of middle and high school students are making very healthy decisions about alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and other drug use. Be on the lookout for false normative beliefs you may have internalized from society and correct them. Share healthy realities with children early and often, using the teachable moments in daily life to reinforce these healthy messages and recognize and reward children for their healthy decisions as they grow. Spread that same word to other parents in local networks too, so they can pass the message on to their families.

Schools and Community Coalitions: Consult with outside prevention specialists to create an evidence-based social norms initiative to help promote healthy student behavior and attitudes, to correct false beliefs, and to decrease the number of enrolled students who use alcohol and other drugs. Use this initiative to evolve existing school policy, practices, and procedures toward the reinforcement of a climate that normalizes healthy student decisions including the choice to refrain from substance use and abuse.

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